

by IRDNC, Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation

An African Conservation Hero: Garth Owen-Smith



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A brief look at the legacy of Garth Owen-Smith, a pioneer of the community conservancy movement, who died in April. His belief, passion and perseverance in conserving our natural environment and bringing communities to the forefront of conservation are obligations to us all.

Garth Owen-Smith, a great African conservation visionary and globally recognized pioneer in community conservation, died on April 11 after a long battle with cancer. Garth's vision of community-driven conservation, which he began to put into practice in Namibia's arid northwest during the 1980s, laid the foundations for the country's internationally acclaimed communal conservancy movement, which now covers roughly 20% of the country and has influenced grassroots conservation efforts as far away as Mongolia, Romania and Montana.

Today there is growing consensus that the people who live in the last remaining wild places on earth are key stewards of the biodiversity found on their lands. More than 50 years ago, when Garth Owen-Smith arrived from South Africa to work as an agricultural extension officer in the rugged and remote Kaokoland of what was then South West Africa, now Namibia, such notions were revolutionary. At that time, wildlife was the property of the state and conservation was the domain of white government officials whose job was to keep unruly locals from poaching state-owned animals. Widespread commercial poaching, much of it by South African officials, combined with the worst drought in living memory had decimated once-rich wildlife numbers. Garth understood that safeguarding wildlife required putting local people in the lead and working in partnership with them.

With bare-bones funding from the Endangered Wildlife Trust and operating against the South African apartheid system at great personal risk to himself, Garth worked with traditional authorities and rural communities to appoint game rangers who were accountable to their own people and who would stop poaching, not merely catch poachers. These men helped solve more than 22 serious poaching cases. Within a couple of years, the massive decline of wildlife in Namibia had been halted and a local vision of wildlife more valuable alive than in a cooking pot was being nurtured.

In the late 1980s, Garth and his life and work partner of 36 years, Dr. Margie Jacobsohn, established IRDNC, Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation, which today is Namibia's leading community conservation NGO. In 1990, when Namibia gained independence, a community-based approach to wildlife management resonated with the early idealism of the new government and community-based conservation was integrated into policy. By then, Garth—now a citizen of this new nation—had focused IRDNC's work on the northwest Kunene Region and then, at the invitation of traditional leaders, in the floodplains and woodlands of the Zambezi Region, in the northeast of Namibia.

IRDNC was instrumental in implementing empowering communal conservancy legislation and it now supports nearly 50 of Namibia's 86 registered communal conservancies. Some of these conservancies, in northwest Namibia, host the last free-roaming populations of black rhino outside of national parks and state-protected areas.

In addition to conservation successes, which include the re-establishment of desert lions in their historical range and an almost three-fold increase in the number of elephants in Namibia, the nation's

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conservancy program has had a massive socio-economic impact, generating £6.5 million (\$8.18 million) in returns to local communities.

Over several decades, Garth upended the traditional conservation establishment with his unwavering conviction that conservation would only succeed if the people who lived alongside wildlife took on the rights—and responsibilities—of managing natural resources. His conservation contributions have been internationally recognized; Garth and Margie have received numerous distinguished awards, including the 1993 Goldman Environmental Prize for Africa, the 1994 United Nations Global Environmental 500 Award, the 1997 Netherlands Knights of the Order of the Golden Ark Award and the 2015 Prince William Lifetime Conservation Award from the Tusk Trust.

Garth and Margie were an extraordinary leadership team, one with the ability to translate vision into implementable strategies. Their remarkable partnership (and beautiful romance, evident in the sparkle in Garth's eyes during the robust discussions and warm embraces they regularly shared) steered IRDNC through difficult years, funding crises and political turmoil, and after retirement they both remained board members deeply concerned for the work of the organization.

A key to IRDNC's success was the formidable team Garth and Margie built up. They hired passionate and committed people and gave them the space to take responsibility and be accountable for their work. They developed close collaborations with other visionaries and partner organizations, who also were instrumental in IRDNC's achievements.

Garth believed that conservation priorities should be dictated by local communities. He fought resolutely against so-called experts with limited local knowledge who sought to tell IRDNC what to do or how to use its resources. He earned his expertise the hard way—not through university degrees but by immersing himself in the places where he worked. Garth developed deep insight into local ecosystems and wildlife and gained a respect for those people built on long-term relationships and trust that could never be learned in educational institutions. He once said, "The long-term conservation of wildlife will not be achieved by military tactics, on computer screens or at workshops, but by field conservationists who build relationships with the people living with wildlife or around our national parks."

After stepping down from the co-directorship of IRDNC, Garth and Margie helped to mentor Conservancy Safaris Namibia, a tourism company owned by five Himba conservancies. When the venture hit financial difficulties, in a gesture that typified his lack of interest in personal financial gain, Garth invested a chunk of his own limited savings. He was known to kickstart projects by funding them from his own pocket. Hundreds of people have been beneficiaries of his personal generosity.

Garth was an incredibly principled person who made great personal sacrifices in order to put communities at the forefront of conservation. Bennie Roman (1958-2018), one of the first Namibian community leaders to embrace conservation after independence and a close friend to Garth, once said about him, "Garth was somebody that inspired me . . . It didn't matter that he was a white outsider. He was like a father figure. He taught me to listen because he was a person who would listen patiently. He came from that background, and I learned that not all white people have the same mentality."

At his home at Wêreldsend (“World’s End”), in a caravan alongside a tin kitchen many hours down a bumpy dirt road in Namibia’s rugged northwest, Garth hosted a constant stream of colleagues and visitors who usually pitched a tent nearby and stayed for several days. Visitors included traditional elders seeking advice on plans for a massive conservation area linking the Skeleton Coast to Etosha National Park, young student interns (many now in leadership roles across Namibia) asking for his ecological knowledge, government officials grateful for the diplomacy with which he handled complicated conflicts, and members of partner organizations and donors who had become close allies and friends.

He loved Wêreldsend, with its round red basalt rocks, mountains and occasional visiting lions. But he was at his happiest in even more remote spots, along dusty riverbeds where he knew every bend, anticipated each elephant herd and recognized—and was held in high regard by—Himba pastoralists as they moved their cattle between grazing areas.

He would find a suitably shady spot, safely above the rivers that could roll vehicles when they flowed. Alongside his old Land Rover—and perhaps remembering the time he had to fire warning shots to scare off a lion that mauled his foot while he and Margie slept—he would lay his bedroll on a tarpaulin and put down a tin trunk with his basic supplies: a blackened and dented kettle, his tea and a few staples. As the kettle bubbled above a flaming mopane branch, Garth would fill his pipe methodically from a plastic bag of Dingler’s Black and White tobacco.

Garth once said in an interview that the most important tools in conservation are your ears, and he had a gift for listening. His eyes would light up, and only after others had spoken—and if he thought it absolutely necessary—would he slowly begin to speak. His thoughts about people and wildlife, usually shared over countless cups of tea with the small fire and stunning scenery as a backdrop, influenced many people, and these conversations are among the best memories of those who were privileged to work with him.

Garth constantly challenged the status quo and never accepted that things should be done a certain way just because society had come to accept them that way. He did not shy away from conflict and often surprised friends and colleagues with his unconventional and iconoclastic views, especially when he felt that principles were at stake. He had an unwavering belief that, given the choice, most people would do the right thing. He often saw potential in people that went beyond their mistakes and flaws, and he gave them opportunities to restore their honor and dignity.

There was also a quirky side to Garth that friends remember fondly. He did not think highly of the views of opinionated youngsters—jokingly, he claimed that people could only be taken seriously after they reached adulthood, at least 25 years of age and sometimes later, especially for men! He also had little regard for certain technological advancements, in particular social media and mobile phones. He kept meticulous professional records with a pencil in small, tattered black pocket notebooks. The old notebooks he kept in shoe boxes.

The community leaders and team members that he mentored regarded him as their father. The chair of the Zambezi Regional Council, Beaven Munali, who was the first community ranger in the Zambezi, said

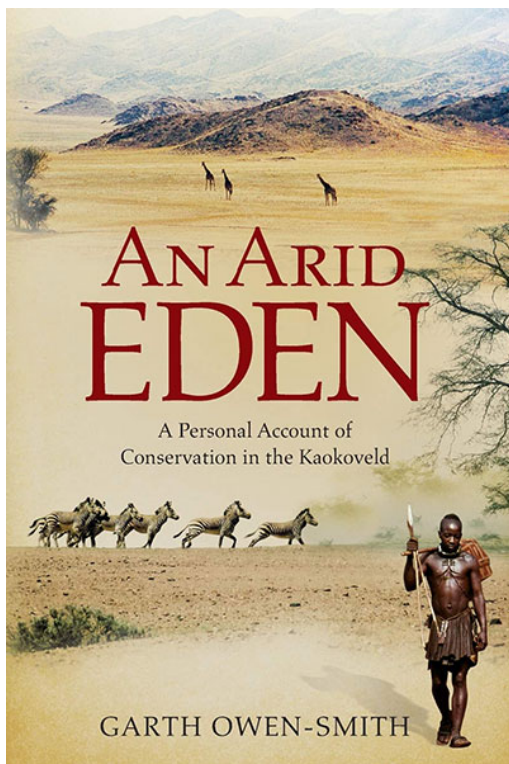
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when hearing of Garth's death, "I miss him the way I miss my Dad." Another "adopted son," John Kasaona—a child of the very first community ranger Garth worked with in the Kunene and now Executive Director of IRDNC—spent his school holidays as one of Garth's camp hands; after his studies, he returned to his region and dedicated his own career to community conservation.

It is best to let Garth have the final word in this tribute. His book *An Arid Eden*, which documents the history of conservation in Namibia's northwest, concludes with this passage:

"My last words are to the younger readers, who can easily be overwhelmed by the magnitude and complexity of the problems the world is facing today. If you believe in a cause and are prepared to stand up for it with passion and perseverance, you can make a difference. Conserving our natural environment will not make you materially rich, but there is no greater satisfaction than having made our planet a better place to live on, even if it is just in a very small way."

Garth's impact was enormous. In Namibia and across the world, he has brought communities to the forefront of conservation. It is perhaps apt that he has left this world during this unprecedented period of confinement, when the world is re-awakening to the pleasures of a slower, more simple life with less noise and distractions.



An Arid Eden. A Personal Account of Conservation in the Kaokoveld. 2010. Jonathan Ball Publishers, Jeppesstown,

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*South Africa. Soft cover, 15 x 23 cm,
Color and monochrome photographs,
610 pages. Available at Amazon for
\$26.69*

Ed. note: Veteran journalist Tony Weaver eulogized Garth Owen-Smith in The Daily Maverick on April 13 under the headline "A Great Tree Has Fallen." A decade ago, Tony also wrote, of Garth's life's work, An Arid Eden: A Personal Account of Conservation in the Kaokoveld: "This is one of the most important works on African conservation in several decades. And while it deals with just one region of Africa, Namibia's Kaokoveld, its lessons and conclusions are universal throughout the continent. It is a monumental work, a detailed account of his almost 50 years in the field in Namibia, battling, often against almost insurmountable odds, to get conservative authorities to recognize that conservation could not be imposed on remote rural communities from afar. The answer he tirelessly fought for was to make the local communities the guardians of their land. The end result is evident throughout Namibia today: a network of community-owned conservancies that make up the Namibian Community Based Tourism Association (NACOBTA), and the groundbreaking, and internationally emulated Integrated Rural Development and Nature Conservation (IRDNC) network. Namibia's Kaokoveld is one of the most beguiling and magnificent wild areas of Africa. Now, at last, the definitive book has been written on its modern history by the man who is not only central to that history but helped to shape the destiny of the region. An Arid Eden is essential reading for all lovers of Africa and its wild places."

Some of Garth Owen-Smith's other writings include: "Namibia's most valuable resource" (1984), "A Brief history of the Conservation and Origin of the Concession Areas in the former Damaraland" (2002), "Elephant Hunting An Alternative View" (2013), "Hunting of Desert Elephants" (2014), "Too many lions in Kunene" (2017).

Banner image: Garth Owen-Smith puffing on his ever-present pipe. Dr. John Ledger photo